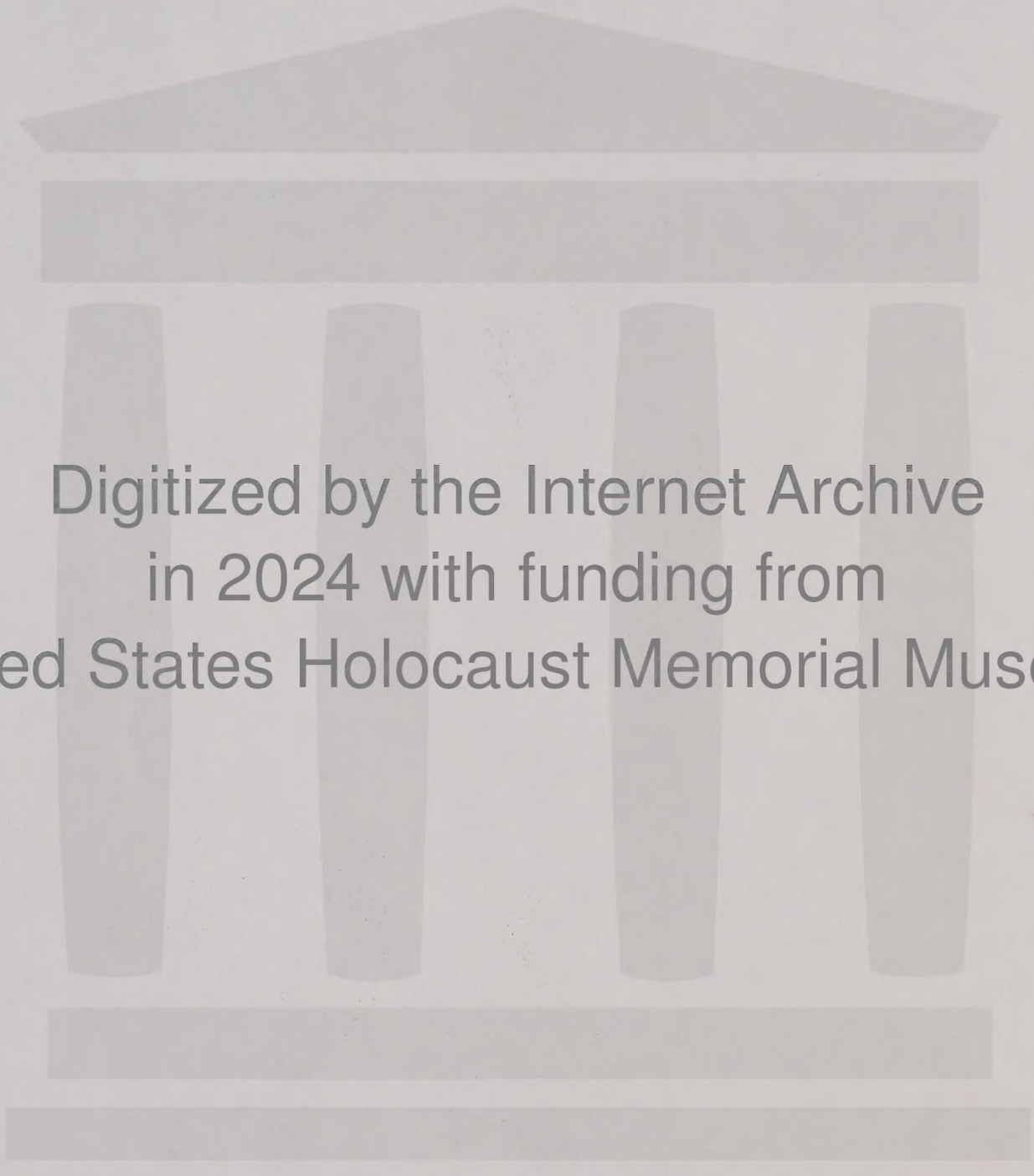
UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum respects the copyright and other intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection and makes good faith efforts to determine the copyright status of such materials. The Museum has a good faith belief that the materials in this collection may be made publicly available. The Museum welcomes additional information about copyright status. If you have additional information or concerns about the copyright ownership of materials in this collection, please contact the Museum's Library by phone at 202-479-9717 or by email at reference@ushmm.org.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

https://archive.org/details/bib292147

A HUMAN VOICE FROM THE BADGASTEIN LAGER

Badgastein
April 9, 1947

Dear Mr. Editor:

It is a gratifying feeling to know that I did not write my last letter in vain, because you gave it space in your paper.

With your permission, I will again write a few lines. Why? Simply because we feel here that if we tell someone our worries and heartaches, we will feel relieved. We are like beaten children, who, if we can complain to someone, our hearts beat easier.

It is Easter -- Passover. It is Passover in the Austrian barracks, where the raindrops come through, and it is Passover in the skyscrapers of America and in Israel, and all over the world. We learned from our grandfathers, from our parents, from our ancestors, that we should celebrate at this time. But we, the children of this age, suffered more than our ancestors.

When our ancestors went out of Egypt, as free men, they were compensated financially for their losses when they left the land of their suffering, and they avenged the atrocities. But we, who lost our dearest ones, two years after our liberation still can't live as free individuals on this earth, can't support ourselves, live on the mercy of others, everyone is doing us favors.

Our hearts break if we think back upon the Passover of the good old days. On the holy night the whole family was sitting together. That was the real Passover. I remember my poor mother, who on the holiday eve put on her white shawl and white apron, and the table was covered with white cloths, and upon them were the gleaming candlesticks. When we went home from the Synagogue, the father's blessings awaited us. Although I couldn't take part in this pleasure, as I lost my father when I was two.

Where did the beautiful memories disappear to? Most of our brothers were wiped out and those who still exist are living scattered in all parts of the world, suffering alone, orphaned and tortured. This is our fate, those of us who were condemned to live, just so we could go on suffering until our dying days.

When, in October of 1945 we were brought here to Badgastein, the officer of the 42nd division made a speech, in which he said that the bleeding wounds of the tortured Jews of Europe will be cured by the Americans, who will do their best for us. For our sufferings, in the camps, for the gas chambers, and the indescribable experiences — we don't expect sympathy and charity, only human rights, and freedom. The same rights every free individual and nation enjoys all over the world! We would like the chance -- those of us who have someone who awaits them with love -- to go to that country and join them, so that we won't live so alone and deserted for the rest of our days.

And those who, with tortured hearts are longing to go to Palestine, they should have a chance to do so. And they shouldn't expect us to go back to the country where the earth is covered with the blood of our parents, sisters and brothers and children, where every grass reminds us of the horrors of the past.

I remember May 4, 1944, after the German troops came in, when I was suffering as a forced-laborer — and they carried off our Jewish brethren to ghettoes. I found out that they took my mother and family. I sat down to write a letter to my hometown, to our neighbor, to find out where they took them. When I addressed the letter I realized that those whom I loved must be in deathly danger, and there was no-one I could write to, and I never got an answer to my letter. A few days afterward I found out that by that time the Christians were forbidden to answer letters from Jews, or do them any favors. Luckily, the following day I begged my commanding officer for a five-day leave. My train left at six in the morning, but I went to the station at ten the night before, so that they shouldn't be able to detain me on some pretext. After 36 hours of travelling I arrived in my hometown. My first trip was to our house, which was locked and sealed, and had a white sign: "Possession of the Treasury". I looked through the windows and saw that everything remained the same way as my loved-ones left them. Even the little kitten meowed under the window and waited for someone to let him in.

I stood there in front of the door, where I spent my childhood years, and where my parents and family awaited me with love in the past, where I was now forbidden to enter. I stood there, and it was difficult to control my tears. I spoke to my neighbors, who told me that they carried off the Jews of the town to Nyiregyhaza. I took leave of our house, and went to Nyiregyhaza, to look up my mother and sisters. At the Jewish center they told me that I had to go to a certain address. I ran there with indescribable excitement, hoping to see them, to talk to them. But I found no-one, except a man from our town whom they left there with his dying mother. They took the others to a farm, which served as Ghetto for the Jews of the Nyirseg section. I rushed there, but I could only walk up to the barbed-wires, because a guard with a sword stood there, and I had to wait my turn, because meanwhile all the forced-laboreres of that section gathered there, whoever had families who belonged to this ghetto.

As I stood there, excited, I saw my cousin, and waved to her; she ran off and told my mother. Soon after that, I saw my mother and sisters with their tiny babies in their arms. My sister-in-law also stood there with her children, and the Jews of our hometown, standing in a group. I thought my mother would run to me, sobbing, to the gate where I stood, so that we could meet again, at long last. But this didn't happen....she just stood there and I waved to her, and she just looked towards me, covering her heartache with a smile, so that I would think there is nothing the matter. As I looked at my mother, I felt she was smiling outwardly only, but her heart was bleeding inside. But even in this situation she was thinking of my welfare, she was worried about me, and her only purpose was to control herself and thereby make me feel better and calmer. Because such is a mother's heart, and this is what we can never forget, this is what nobody can make up to us.

About three hours later a guard came and at the orders of an officer they led us through the ghetto but told us that whoever dares to say one word to his family, or even touch his loved-ones, will have his visiting permit taken away, and will be chased out. My mother walked very close to me, although she was supposed to remain at a distance. But still she came close, and secretly pressed my hand. This was her last handshake in her life.

When we got to the other side, we were told to stand in line, and they asked us whether we had weapons, how much money we had, then they allowed a ten-minute conversation. The rain came down heavily on us, but we didn't notice we were soaked through. I just stood with my mother and sisters, and simply couldn't speak. I had strength only to ask them how they were. My mother, in her unforgettable voice, started consoling me, although she knew very well she was the one who was condemned to die a horrible death, and not I. Later they allowed us to give them the packages we brought. I also gave them my humble little package, which I hastily bought. When they took the package, time was up and we had to say good-bye. With tears in our eyes we kissed each other, for the last time in this sad life.

The following day I took another package, but this time they wouldn't let me in, and couldn't even take the package to them, they chased me away cruelly. There was nothing we could do, we were helpless, and the next day we went back to our company. It was Passover then, and it is Passover now....they were murdered long ago, and I am still suffering here in the Badgastein camp.

My God, when will this ever end? Will I ever again be a human being?

Yours very truly,

Your faithful lager-reader,

Ference Rottenstein

Badgastein, February 7, 1947

Dear Mr. Editor:

Please forgive me for bothering you with my letter, but this week I received a copy of your November 30th issue, and I read (this is putting it mildly) I almost ate up every line.

That I'm not enthusiastic about the Hungarians, is not suprising, because what those murderers carried on with us wasn't human, in fact, even animals shouldn't have been treated that way. But I'd like to go on to other matters.

Today, as I read your paper, or rather the paper's outstanding articles by Zilshy and Zsolt Agi, ("At the Funeral of 700 Martyrs"), the past has awakened in me again. I take liberty in writing these few lines, as I was also there in the vicinity of Shopron (Harka) and as I read the article, the old memories became very vivid again.

700 Martyrs! Seven hundred they listed, but how many thousands of unmarked graves there are there, which they'll never find, because they threw them into the ditches like dogs, and threw the earth over them. Very often I also took part in this, although this was much harder work than others, because the lice were on the frozen bodies by the thousands. I don't know whether in America they showed those horrible films that the liberating troops took of the camps on the day of the liberation. The name of this picture is "Deathpile" (Todesmuhle). I also have a booklet which illustrates the victims of German barbarism. From these you can gather what a horrible task it was to bury these unfortunates. The reason why I still went to bury them was that this way they were buried more decently, also I got some hot soup, which was the same as water, but better than nothing.

And now I remember the mournful marches, with a daily death of 15-20-30, who died of typhus or exhaustion, and a shiver runs down my spine as I think back on what happened.

In that cold weather we weren't warmly dressed: shorts, wooden shoes in which our feet froze, a storm-coat, and no gloves. This was the way we carried the dead up to the mountainside. The wind threw snow in our faces. The earth was frozen stiff and hard, so that we first had to make a fire, and when the earth melted, we began to dig and bury our dead into their unmarked graves. If it was at all possible, we buried the men and women separately, but in many cases we had to bury them together. At first we began to mark down the number of dead, that is, a friend of mine, Dr. Imre Braun from near Szeged, began to make a list, but later he also fell victim of suffering and illness. A lot of men had typhus-fever, and all of these were gathered into one building. When it started becoming dangerous and the Germans were afraid the townspeople will catch the illness, they wanted to put the typhus-building on fire. They already poured benzine around the house with the straw-roof, when Dr. Braun volunteered to cure the sick ones. They locked him up with the others, and it was forbidden to be in contact with them. We gave them "food" through the windows. But the sickness spread. There were no sanitary facilities, and

meanwhile they kept bringing in the men from the fronts, covered with lice. When, four weeks later we went in for a body, Dr. Braun was like a skeleton, and all his teeth fell out, so that I hardly recognized him, so my doctor friend died, too.

And there were other horrors! As a result of frostbite there were many amputations. We stood by helplessly, as there were no medical instruments, no medicine, and even the doctors collapsed. There were times when one of my friends was doing the burying, the next day he was buried. But there were always new heroes, and always new victims...

Yes, we were the heroes! Because the soldier, who went to fight at the fronts, fought the enemy with weapons. But we? What did we fight for? But we really fought. Without weapons, between two fires. Because friends we didn't have, only enemies. They shot at us from the front and the back also, and we couldn't defend ourselves. But there was one thing in us: Hope. This kept life in us, that once we will be freed, we will be free men again. Because those who let themselves go, and said to themselves, this will never end, they lay down on the snow-covered straw (because the wind blew the snow into the open building) and never got up again, because only those got food who went to work. But we awaited the liberation, and the more we waited, the worse the situation became.

I was taken into forced labor in 1941 -- On the first day I met a friend, who had Communistic feelings. When he saw me he greeted me: "Hello friend! This won't last long any more." He patted me on the back. But for us it lasted long: I was in forced-labor until November 20, 1944. For 36 months we were everybody's slave, kicked by everybody, like dogs. And after 36 months, instead of freeing us, we were given over to the S.S. And then came the horrors of Shopron. At last, in March of 1945 we heard the roaring of the Russian guns. Then they carried us further. For 36 months we were in labor-camps, for 5 months they deported us, but what followed after that, the last 37 days -- these were worse then anything: This was when the real horrors began.

I remember clearly: On March 28th, on a Wednesday evening, they started us off towards Mauthausen. They announced that those who can should start marching, because the ones remaining will be killed. Four days we marched, night and day, hungry and tired. During the first night the Russian planes kept coming, and threw down the big "Stalin-candles". They bombed Shopron. When we arrived, Shopron was burning. It was like daylight everywhere, caused by the fires and the "Stalin-candles". There were bodies everywhere. When we got out of town, a drunken S.S. shot at us, and we had three dead. One of my friends had to bury them. One of them was a lawyer from Kiskunhalas, I don't remember his name. When we started off, they gave us shovels, etc., so that on the way, whoever dies can be buried.

By morning, we arrived at a mine, where they gathered all the citizens of the city of Shopron, about 17,000 people. After a rest of two hours we continued our trip. It was very urgent, because the Russians were close, and to remain behind meant death. But we wanted to live. We marched the entire day, until, towards the evening we spotted a town, where we thought

we could get some food, and can rest. Instead of this, we got beatings, the S.S. men were waiting for us at the outskirts of the town, and began to beat us with rubber-sticks and iron bars. They shot at us with machine-guns. There were piles of bodies lying around on the streets, we had to walk all over them, to escape. People fell like flies, but what did it matter to us by then? By then we weren't people, we were animals, and we ran with the instincts of an animal. When finally we escaped immediate danger, we all looked for our friends and relations, but of course couldn't find them, and we couldn't return. When we got near another town, we were trembling with fear. These were the nights of terror.

During four days we got 40 decagrams of bread and 8 deca margarine for food. And nothing else. When we finally arrived at a station (Tulln) they packed us into a wagon, 210 people into a Pullman-car, because that was the only type available, and it was urgent that we get on the way. Soon after we started off, we had an air-attack before Krems. The coward Germans hid themselves, and pulled off their red swastikas from their sleeves. We had to remain in the train, but for us the planes and the noise of the attack was sweet music; we knew this would bring us liberation. Meanwhile they bombed the Krems railroad station, and we had to wait five days while they repaired it, and during this time we got no food at all, so that we chewed grass in our hunger. If someone else would have told me this, I wouldn't have believed it, but I and my friends experienced this. During these few days very many people died, too. Finally, after starving for 11 days, we arrived at Mauthausen. Hungry, exhausted, tortured, we hardly had strength, just dragged ourselves. But we still had 3 kilometers of walking ahead of us. Five of us marched in a row, five friends, and we marched together. When one of our friends said he was unable to go on, and asked us that if we ever get home we should console his wife and mother -- but we wouldn't let him go, we took him by the arm and carried him along with us. Because whoever was unable to go on, was shot.

As we walked further, we asked a German woman whether the damp was far. She answered, about 20 minutes. We asked whether we would get food there, and she answered, yes. Then we started to cry in happiness. We soon reached the camp. At last we were going to get food: Ten people got one kilogram bread. There was no more supper for us. We were there for two weeks, and meanwhile I met an old man. I asked him: "Uncle Schaechter, will we ever get home?" "Of course, son, God will help us and we will be free," the old man answered.

And from then on, every day, with trembling knees I walked over to him, to ask him that same question, to get that same answer -- and this kept my soul alive.

Meanwhile, the Russians were getting near again, and we had to go on. During the last night we were awakened by the noise of airplanes, then a bomb hitting something. We awaited death, but it didn't come. Only the earth and pebbles the bomb hit showered on the roof. Nothing happened, or at least we thought so, but the bomb fell about ten feet from us. When we went into the yard next morning, a horrible sight awaited us: Human bodies all over the place, and parts of bodies, and mutilated bodies hanging from the trees, where the

air-pressure threw them. Because those people who had no room within the barracks slept outside in the yard, and every inch was taken up as sleeping-space, although it was constantly raining and it was muddy. I don't know what type of bomb it was, but it must have been German.

That morning we started towards Gunskirchen. I couldn't walk any further, but my friends wouldn't let me stay there. "If we remained together for four years, we'll have to remain together, they said.

The trip took 3 days, and we advanced 30 kilometers, but we advanced very slowly. Meanwhile one of my five friends found his younger brother, but he had no pleasure in that, because as soon as we started off, he couldn't walk on. First he threw away his bag, then we took him by the arm and walked on. But we couldn't take this long. He sat by the ditches -- and they shot him. His brother consoled himself by saying he must have walked into a house, but we knew he was shot. And this went on for three days. People fell out of line one after the other, sat down, and waited for death. And we just looked, again, helpless. During one hour they shot at least 100 men. When we heard a shot, we knew someone was killed, and soon we saw his body. We dragged ourselves on. Later, to save the trouble of bothering with bodies, the S.S. men told those who sat down to lie down and cover themselves with blankets or coa$$, and when they did this, the S.S. guys put their gun at the man's head and fired. The man's brain shot up like a fountain, and the hat flew up into the air.

Wherever we went, only bodies were lying around. Ahead of us walked a father with his son, and when the father couldn't go on, the younger one begged him to try, and dragged him on. "Daddy, come on, because they'll shoot you." But the father wasn't able to, and sat down on the ground. The son sat down next to him. "If they shoot you, let them shoot me, too." The S.S. came, and the boy said, "Daddy can't go on." The S.S. shot the father while the boy looked on, and sent the boy ahead. And when there were too many bodies, they cut off a few people from the end of the lines to gather the bodies and bury them. When they were through, they were also shot.

These, and similar heartbreaking things happened, until finally we arrived at Gunskirchen. Of course if someone dared steal some grass on the way, he was shot. But Gunskirchen was even more horrible than Mauthausen. They packed 2300 people into one barrack that could take in 500 only, so that there was no space for lying down, but we just sat, close together, with blankets on our heads. Every morning, in knee-deep mud we had to stand while they called the roll. (Appel) This meant about 2-3 hours standing. Whoever couldn't take it was shot by the S.S. I was sick myself, had influenza, and high fever, and I desired water, but there was none. I gave my bread-ration for some water. Sometimes I stood for hours under the pipes that run along the roof-tops, and gathered the rain-drops, and as soon as I had a few drops, I eagerly drank them. My friend, who was in better condition, stood in line for hours, to get a little water. But when he finally got the water, in the crowd they knocked it out of his hands. Finally, in one of the women's barracks I spotted a woman I knew from Szentesh, who was in charge of "sanitation" by us. I asked her, for God's sake, to give me a little water, and she immediately gave me some. I cried.

The women were given water, because they were taken to wash, and they brought some back with them.

We sat for 14 days and waited for death. Meanwhile many died, very many. They kept bringing in new people. Latrines -- there were two for 2000 people, in which there were ten seats, five for the men, five for women. We had to stand in line for hours until our turn came. Whoever couldn't stand it and sat down was shot immediately.

At last the day of freedom arrived. Friday, May 4th. By then I was so weak, I couldn't walk, just sat and thought of the last bitter years, and about the fact that I had to die at such a young age, at 25. I hardly lived! ....I thought of my mother, my sisters, who knows where they are, possibly they died already in the crematory of Auschwitz. But hope, the steady hope, didn't help me then. The lice were all over us by the millions, so that we picked them off by the fistful, from our armpits. We hardly got anything to eat.

As I was sitting there, all of a sudden I saw a familiar face, but I had no more strength to yell in the crowd, but I asked my friend to call him. He was my childhood friend, and when he saw me he was very happy. "Are you here, too?" he asked, and said my cousin was in the other barracks, I should go over to him. But I didn't go; partly because I had no strength, partly because I loved this cousin of mine, and knew he and I would both die, and didn't want to cause myself any more heartaches. I just stayed there, and was thinking. For this I still had strengbh.

And we were waiting for death, but it did not come. But something else came: Liberation! People were cheering, kissing, throwing their caps in the air, but I just sat there on the ground, with the blanket on my head. My friends started to yell: "Feri, we are free! We are free! Look out the windows -- the S.S. aren't standing behind the windows anymore!" But I didn't believe it, just continued sitting, I thought they'll get tired of it and it will stop, because we were promised a lot by a lot of people, but never got anything. The Swiss Red Cross promised to take us over, but nothing came of it. I thought: this will be the same. As I was sitting, a boy came in with a bag on his shoulders and began to speak very fast: "Why didn't you come and help? They took everything away from me, this is all I could bring." And he started unpacking his bag. When I heard this, I looked up at my friend and said this only: "Bonzo, now I believe it, you go ahead, too."

My friend ran, and my other friends too, whoever had the strength. My friend ran back, all out of breath, without his cap and without buttons on his coat, but instead, he brought one kilo of margarine, and a half-kilo of bread. My other friend brought ten packages of sweet cocoa, and a third one a pair of S.S. boots and a half-kilo of margarine. Whatever they could, they brought. The hungry people ran towards the margarine and pushed, so that they could get some food. And this night many died. Whoever was weak was crushed in the crowd, too.

We started to eat, eagerly: thin slice of bread and thin spread of margarine, and sweet cocoa on top. This was the first meal for our starved, shrunken stomachs. But we didn't care, but kept on eating, and with this

our liberation was here. However, our suffering was not over. But I don't want to go into this, not at present. Since then, I'm living here in the Austrian camp, at present at Badgastein, and am waiting for the time when I can rejoin my beloved sisters, who live in New York. Even now, 22 months after liberation, hundreds of thousands live in Austrian and German lagers, and are awaiting their chance to reach their destinations, to start homes of their own again, to be able to rest in their own homes.

I don't want to write about life here, and the things that happened after the liberation, although there is a great deal to tell. But this will do for the present, I just wanted to write the above so that those who cannot imagine what Hitler and his henchmen did, will know. Although I didn't describe everything, because what we went through it is impossible to write down — it is possible only to have lived it.

I ask your indulgence again for bothering you. I remain yours respectfully,

Ference Rottenstein
Hotel Straubinger 21
Badgastein, Austria